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Review of *Black Gathering: Art, Ecology, Ungiven Life* by Sarah Jane Cervenak (Duke University Press)

by Kelann Currie-Williams | Book Reviews, Issue 13.2 (Fall 2024)

ABSTRACT In *Black Gathering: Art, Ecology, Ungiven Life*, Sarah-Jane Cervenak engages with the ecoaesthetic, ecopoetic, and ecoliterary work of Black artists and writers who, through their engagement with the environment, imagine the earth and Black life outside the logics of governance, property and ownership. Guided by two primary concepts, Cervenak considers "Gathering" and "Ungiven" as crucial frameworks to think otherwise about Black sociality, togetherness, and gathering aesthetically. By attending to the creative and artistic practices of Toni Morrison, Nikki Wallschlaeger, Samiya Bashir, Gabrielle Ralambo-Rajerison, Gayl Jones, and Leonardo Drew, Cervenak underlines "gathering" as both an act of resistance to the enclosures of anti-blackness and an insistent practice of "deregulated togetherness."

KEYWORDS Black studies, aesthetics, ecocriticism, literary studies, relationality

Black Gathering: Art, Ecology, Ungiven Life. By Sarah Jane Cervenak. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021, 208 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-1-4780-1447-8. US List: $26.95.

Sarah Jane Cervenak's *Black Gathering: Art, Ecology, Ungiven Life* presents a rich and noteworthy intervention into the scholarship in visual culture, literary studies, and Black ecologies, through a nuanced focus on the aesthetics and poetics of Black togetherness and gathering. Concerned with how Black artists and writers create worlds of otherwise existence and unregulated possibility through their work, Cervenak situates writing, sculpture, photography, and painting as artistic

practices capable of yielding environments of relationality (13). As the subtitle of the monograph suggests, the book's preoccupation lies in attending to what is produced at the intersection of art and ecology. It is in this nexus that the works of Black writers and artists not only highlight the capacity of togetherness to obstruct the over-regulation and governance of Black social life, but also undermine the extractionist and anti-Black presumption that such life can be propertied or given away (7).

Black Gathering interrogates the logic of possessiveness that shapes whiteness and the belief in its ownership over earth and land, and over Black and Indigenous peoples in the Americas. Through this, Cervenak suggests that "the release of earth from its fraudulent ownership is coterminous with the release of flesh" (11). Here, she effectively positions Black life (its body, its flesh) as tethered to the earth itself in what Cervenak refers to as the "fleshy-earthly" (74). By way of her engagement with the legacies of transatlantic slavery, settler-colonialism, extractivism, and racial capitalism—a phenomenon that Jodi Melamed after Ruth Wilson Gilmore sees as a "technology of antirelationality"[1]—Cervenak creates an ecological and aesthetic-oriented framework to think about Black sociality, togetherness, and gathering outside of the enclosures of anti-Blackness and white supremacy. Thinking alongside scholars and writers such as Camille Dungy, Kimberly Ruffin, Tiffany Lethabo King, Saidiya Hartman, and Dorceta Taylor, Cervenak's *Black Gathering* employs a wide range of expertise, demonstrating its interdisciplinary rigor and notable contributions to the fields of eco-criticism and Black geographies. Not wholly concerned with providing an historical overview or critical analysis of environmental justice movements sought out by Black communities, nor narrowly focused on attending to Black feminist art and poetics only as forms of cultural production, Cervenak's monograph falls somewhere between these two spaces. *Black Gathering* proposes that the aesthetic qualities of the environment and the ecological substance of Black life need to be thought together. This proposition, of attending to the ecoaesthetic and ecopoetic qualities that punctuate Black art, place *Black Gathering* alongside key texts in the

study of Black ecologies, such as *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry* by Camille Dungy and *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions* by Kimberly N. Ruffin.[2]

Cervenak is guided by two overarching concepts, which she weaves through the book: "gathering" and "ungiven." She unravels the polysemy of "gathering" by effectively drawing on its two parts of speech, as noun and verb. In the first part of the book entitled "Gathering's Art," Cervenak begins by exploring "gathering" as a noun. In this sense, gathering refers to a collective or assembly—the site wherein togetherness is engendered. As noun, a gathering is not unlike an ecology which, in a bio-environmental context, is marked by relations and interactions with actants and organisms. Throughout "For A While At Least," the book's first chapter, Cervernak engages with the prose of Toni Morrison and the prose-poetry of Nikki Wallschlaeger to reveal the "artfulness" (16) of gathering and the ecoaesthetics of relation that might be experienced through colour, texture, or affect. In a critical and generous meditation on *Beloved,* she presents how "Morrison merges the ecological and the aesthetic to advance an unextractive ecoaesthesis" (24) and that such a fusing of the ecological and the aesthetic is a core preoccupation within Black feminist writing. Wallschlaeger's poetry collection *Houses* is brought into conversation with *Beloved* to illustrate the unique capacity of gathering and the intimacies of "communal living" (26) to not only alter the quality of an environment but also envisage home (imagined or otherwise) as outside logics of ownership and extraction (26). The ecopoetic bend of both texts serve as paths towards thinking Black ecologies more expansively, which is to say viewing ecology as it refers to the earthly-environmental as well as through its etymological meaning of "*oikos*"—a home or site of gathering (9).

In chapter two, "The Art of the Matter," there is a distinctive spatial shift as readers are ushered from earth, through its thresholding atmosphere, and into the cosmos. In her analyses of Samiya Bashir's poetry collection *Field Theories* and

Gabrielle Ralambo-Rajerison's prose poem "To What Do I Owe This Pleasure," Cervernak asks her readers to, once again, think of ecoaesthetic possibility but in the new context of astrophysics and the extraplanetary—what she refers to as the "cosmosaesthetic and cosmopoetic" (60). Cervenak makes a decisive shift by decentering earth and the physical world to consider "the attempted cosmic reach of anti-Blackness" (66) in the context of quantum physics as well as dark matter and energy, as presented in Bashir and Ralambo-Rajerison's respective poetic interventions. While inventive and speculative in its reach, readers may find that the chapter falls short of connecting fully with Cervernak's three other chapters, leaving her interrogation of gathering as a resistance to the enclosure and regulation of Black life under settler-colonialism and plantation slavery (and its afterlives) uneven. Readers who are keenly interested in engaging with the earthly and environmental concerns of Black ecologies, might find that Cervenak's analysis of a "poetic experience of galactic relation" (17) does not sufficiently address "what anti-Blackness does to earthly relation" (89).However, the chapter carefully reintroduces her earlier concept of 'ungiven' which is foregrounded in the opening to *Black Gathering* and serves as the book's philosophical contribution.

The book's second part, "The Art of Gathering," takes up the concept of "ungiven" in earnest by exploring its relationship to Black gathering (or togetherness). Ungiven or ungivenness for Cervenak is a conceptual and political refutation of whiteness' presumed possession over lands and bodies. Drawing from Black studies scholarship she advances that the earth cannot be owned and, as such, cannot be given—it is not "given-overable" (68). Likewise, Black lives cannot be propertied because they are as always-already outside of regulation, confirming that both life and freedom cannot be gifted nor *given* to Black people in the wake of slavery's abolition—it is simply ungivable. Despite not explicitly citing Tiffany Lethabo King who, in *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies*, writes of the obsessive preoccupation the white "conquistador settler" has with the ownership and domination of both land and

Black lives,[3] one can assume that Cervenak's line of thinking around possession draws from King's work. With this as the section's guiding frame, Cervenak shifts to gathering's workings as a verb to consider how artistic practices might be *acts* or expressions of gathering or "bringing together" in themselves.

In this section, Cervenak creatively and critically positions the work of Gayl Jones and Leonardo Drew as intricate "unanticipated" arrangements (98), of language in Jones's case and of material objects in Drew's. Across both chapters, Cervenak remains curious about the capacity of experimentation and abstraction to hinder discernibility and extractive modes of relating. Beginning with "Arrangements Against the Sentence," the third chapter, Cervenak considers how the experimental writing of Jones's short story collection "Towards an All-Inclusive Structure," thwarts knowability through a mode of gathering that resists regulation. The linguistic composition of Jones's stories is deliberately abstract and operate as such to shelter the "right to opacity"[4] of her disabled and mentally ill Black characters. Through enactments of what Cervenak calls "cripped gatherings of language" (104), the internal lives of Jones's characters are left ungiven and deregulated. In the fourth and final chapter entitled, "A Project From Outside," readers are invited to see the abstracted sculpture installations created by Leonardo Drew through the lens of disposability, indiscernible chaos, and material togetherness. The experimental sculptures within Drew's decades-long series "God's Mouth" are the core objects of study in this chapter. The discarded and weathered materials which Drew gathers and composes into sculptures (151) are, as Cervenak argues, the "the beauty of togethernesses without explanation" (124). Through her analysis, Cervenak makes a decidedly incisive move to position Drew not only as a visual artist but also as a "polyecological" artist (134) whose practice relies on the reuse of disposed objects and incorporating their ecological histories into the composition of the sculptures.

Cervernak's *Black Gathering* differentiates itself from the current work being produced in the fields of Black ecologies and Black geographies, as seen through

the scholarship of J. T. Roane, Camilla Hawthorne, Justin Hosbey, and Jovian Scott Lewis. The book's focus on the ecoaesthetic, ecopoetic, and ecoliterary work of Black artists and writers who imagine the earth and Black life outside the logics of property and ownership, succeeds in gifting its readers an arsenal of lush frameworks with which to think. Across all four chapters, Cervenak's writing weaves in and out of the poetic and the academic, producing a lyrically rigorous and profoundly intricate text. While at times challenging to parse for exactly these reasons, *Black Gathering* demands of its readers slow reading and an even slower meditative engagement which might prove difficult yet ultimately rewarding for readers unfamiliar with the current scholarship of Black ecologies, Black geographies, ecopoetics, and anti-colonial philosophy. Moreover, her attunement to the potential of gathering and togetherness to enact new modes of being in the world will be valuable to students, scholars, and artists alike who are in search of an expansive theorization on what an ecology or environment could be. Throughout, she is guided by her belief that "an artful interaction with the environment potentiates a dream of another relation" (13). As a kind of refrain, *Black Gathering* challenges its readers to consider that the term "Black ecologies" could otherwise be expressed as the study which takes seriously the beautifully entangled relationship between ungiven people and ungiven earth.

Notes

1. Jodi Melamed, "Racial Capitalism," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 76–85. ↩
2. Cervenak uses the terms "ecopoetics" and "ecoaesthetics" to refer to a poetic and aesthetic (or artful) engagement with the environment that acknowledges the interconnectedness of earth, non-humans, and humans. ↩
3. Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 107. ↩
4. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 109. ↩

Author Information

Kelann Currie-Williams

Kelann Currie-Williams is a visual artist, oral historian, and writer based in Tiohtià:ke/Montreal where they are currently a PhD student at Concordia University's Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Society and Culture. Their research focuses on the histories of image-making and photographic preservation/archival practices taken up by Black Canadians during the late-nineteenth to late-twentieth centuries, and the presence of these photographs within personal, community, and institutional archives. Kelann's work has appeared in *Urban History Review*, *Canadian Journal of History*, *Topia: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*, and *Philosophy of Photography*. They are an affiliate of the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling (COHDS).

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